

On Blackness and the Nation in Arabic Hip Hop: Case Studies from Lebanon and Libya

by Chris Nickell and Adam Benkato | Cultural Constructions of Race and Racism in the Middle East and North Africa / Southwest Asia and North Africa (MENA/SWANA), Issue 10.1 (Spring 2021)

ABSTRACT In this contribution, Chris Nickell and Adam Benkato think together about the mobilization of Blackness in Arabic hip hop from two different contexts: a rap battle in Beirut, Lebanon and music videos from Benghazi, Libya. In both, hip hop artists confront Blackness with the nation through the Afro-diasporic medium of hip hop. Although the examples we consider here participate, in several ways, in hip hop's larger generic functions as a globalized Black medium of resistance, they also bolster pre-existing discourses of race and racism, anti-Blackness in particular. We argue that this seeming contradiction—instances of anti-Blackness appearing in an iteration of a Black expressive form—is in fact a feature, not a bug, of the flexible way the genre works. We have paired these two examples, which we describe and analyze individually given their differing social contexts as well as our differing research focuses, in order to glimpse the discursive level at which racecraft functions.

KEYWORDS anti-Blackness, Arabic, hip hop, Lebanon, Libya, masculinity, race

Ejecting Blackness from the Nation: A Rap Battle in Beirut

On the iconic steps of a rapidly-gentrifying neighborhood in East Beirut called Mar Mkhayel, a crowd of mostly young Lebanese men with some foreigners and even fewer women has gathered to witness the first recorded rap battle in Lebanon. Chyno, a Syrian-Filipino rapper based in Beirut, has organized this event to launch the battle rap league he manages: *The Arena*, or *el Halba* in Arabic. Battle rap can be characterized as a subgenre of hip hop that grows out of African American vernacular spoken word traditions like the dozens and played an important role in its improvised form in early hip hop. It has become a commercially viable subculture in recent years, with the establishment of several US- and Canada-based leagues that feature professional battle rappers who trade delivery of pre-written sets of “bars” in performances that regularly garner several million views on YouTube. In this rap battle, Ivorian-Lebanese rapper Edd Abbas will square off against Lebanese-American professional battle rapper Dizaster while “Diz” is in Beirut for vacation in late May 2015.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Image-1-Adam-Benkato.png> >

Figure 1. Edd Abbas (left) squares off against Dizaster (right) with Chyno moderating (center) on the steps of Mar Mkhayel in East Beirut.

Edd begins with a call of “ouf ouf ouf” to which the audience dutifully responds with one more “ouf.”¹ (In the footnotes, readers can watch along with English subtitles for the various moments described here.) This is the traditional opening for *zajal*, a form of improvisational Arabic folk poetry with enduring cachet in Lebanon, which leads Edd into a sung line. His brief but powerful allusion to *zajal* grounds Edd’s claims to Lebanese-ness by a chain of equivalence that runs from the genre to the nation by way of a gentlemanly, working-class masculinity grounded in verbal over physical prowess. *Zajal* here is conjured as an Arabized, indigenous analogue to the rap battle, one wherein pairs of boys or men, from school children through village elders, square off in a competition of wit. Edd transitions from this opening gesture grounding the rap battle in Lebanese and wider Arabic aural traditions into a spoken rebuke of Dizaster’s bad boy persona. He berates Dizaster for forgetting his roots, behaving badly in the US by snitching on and punching MCs, and embarrassing his people.

Throughout his bars, Edd makes clear that he identifies himself as a part of the Lebanese “we.” He refers repeatedly to this collective that sometimes includes and other times excludes Dizaster, whose given name is Bashir. I want to draw attention to the nuance of this inclusive/exclusive “we” in the following excerpt, where Edd’s insult lands favorably enough to get an encore:²

Bashir, abroad you represent us. Not just me, but all of us [gestures to the audience].

يا باشير، أنت برّة تتمثلنا، مش بس أنا بس تتمثل كل العالم.

Abroad you represent us.
So for God's sake, be smarter.

أنت برّة تتمثلنا فبحياة الخالق كون أذكي

Every time you hit an MC, I as Lebanese am put down

أنا كلبناني عم MC كل ما تضرب بتبهدل

You don't have the soul of a good sport (x2).

ما عندك روح رياضية

You just have jealousy,
And that's why you act like a child.

عندك غيرة لهيك تتولدى

Fuck this shit, you embarrass us in front of foreigners!

كس إخت هالشغلة قدام الأجنب جرسنا

In the opening phrases, Dizaster is held up as representative for all Lebanese, as Edd implores him to be smarter. In the closing phrases, Dizaster embarrasses Edd and his fellow Lebanese while abroad, which calls the the diasporic battle rapper's own Lebaneseness into question. This questioning further buttresses Edd's own claims to Lebanese-ness. Edd's performance of Lebanese identity challenges the audience to reconcile his Blackness with his being more Lebanese than the diasporic Dizaster.

Edd's bars about authenticity and identity play out good-naturedly, but Dizaster changes the energy completely when he begins his.³ He imitates a stereotypical Arab accent as he says in English "are you ready, Eddy?" before sliding into an Arabic imitation of Edd's gravelly voice and cool demeanor to mock his flow and self-possession. This impression gives way to Dizaster's higher-pitched, more pinched voice as he lays into Edd's skin color:

You know what I've heard?

بتعرف شو سمعت أنا؟

That you're afraid I want to insult your representation.

إنّ كنت خيفان بدي إنزعلك سمعتك

That I'm Dizaster and I hit people in America,

إنه >انا ديزاستر مخبط عليه >بأميركا

that I'm going to wear out your name

وبدي شو هلك إسمك

But think about it, Eddy. Look at your body:

بس فكر فيها يا أدّي. طلع بشكلك وجسمك

How can I blacken your face [i.e. shame you] when you're already black?

ما كيف بدي سؤدك وجهك؟ منك! أسود كلّك!

The pun here is a racist one in which “to blacken another’s face” is to shame or embarrass, which Dizaster literalizes by referencing Edd’s skin color. Roughly 75 percent of the rest of Dizaster’s bars directly insult Edd by making fun of his hair, the history of African slavery in Arab societies that continues through the *kefāla* system that organizes the forced labor of largely East African domestic workers in Lebanon today, and Edd’s attempt to ground his bars in a Lebanese-ness that Dizaster denies him. The remaining 25 percent are jokes about penis size and sexual violence that solidify the lyrical performance of hypermasculinity and intersect with stereotypes of ethnicity and race.

At one point, Dizaster thoroughly rejects Edd’s origins by calling him Sudanese and compares his role in Arabic hip hop to that of a live-in superintendant, which in Beirut is often the job of a racialized immigrant other.⁴ In doing so, Dizaster begins quietly intense and menacing before he takes up a tremendous amount of space with his gestures, fully extending his arms, smacking his chest, punctuating his speech with aggressive hand movements. Chyno, the battle moderator, plasters on a nervous smile as he rocks back and forth, while Edd adopts a hands-behind-back stance of waiting. Dizaster’s two extremes of theatrical masculinity here uncomfortably resemble very real masculinities of racial supremacy—both the white supremacist violence against Black people in the US and the beatings of East African domestic workers in Lebanese households that sometimes make headlines. And yet many members of the audience at The Arena seem to be laughing good-naturedly.

The masculinity Dizaster performs during his bars enables anti-Blackness to grind across cultural formations, using humor as a vehicle or alibi. Battle rap, like its progenitor hip hop, is a Black verbal art form, one in which Black people still predominate but where the playing field has widened in the US and elsewhere to include more non-Black rappers than other sub-genres of hip hop. Dizaster is one such non-Black rapper who has risen through the ranks. In much of his battling against Black rappers in the US, Dizaster takes on the stylings of a hard-edged, African American masculinity through which he jockeyes for dominance in verbal skill, gun violence, and conquest of women. While his bars might be frequently characterized as “crossing a line” based on audience reactions, that line is more often one of personal attacks rather than racial politics. Battle rap is also an art form in which homophobia, misogyny, and ethnic stereotyping are par for the course. Indeed, in North American battles, Dizaster frequently receives and circulates Arab and Muslim stereotypes, despite his being from a Druze family.⁵ When Dizaster does make anti-Black remarks in these US and Canadian battles, audience support quickly retreats and he finds little response to his punch lines.

In other words, a diasporic Lebanese man who has built a career competing in a Black American verbal art form is returning to Beirut and marshaling both hypermasculinity and Lebanese anti-Black stereotypes to delegitimize the authority of a Black Lebanese competitor, to the approval of a young audience that skews lighter-skinned and male, in a video that ultimately helps sustain a young hip hop scene in the Middle East. Race-as-discourse in Dizaster’s bars activate those anti-Black stereotypes this audience connects to, while the inhabiting of the ethnic Lebanese voice, carriage, and gesture solidify race-as-performance that obliterates Edd’s more complicated and precarious performance of Lebaneseness. This situation is a mirror image of the kind of Black self-fashionings that Marc Perry identifies as traveling with the hip hop genre.⁶ Instead, what has traveled in the battle between Dizaster and Edd Abbas is the anti-Black racism common in both the US and Lebanon, through the Afro-diasporic vehicle of battle rap.

Chyno, the league organizer and himself an active rapper in Beirut, knew this kind of racist performance was a distinct possibility back in 2015, having followed Dizaster and the larger US and Anglophone Canadian battle rap scenes for over a decade. Ultimately, Dizaster's ability to increase visibility for The Arena led Chyno to work with him, several times now. Each time, Chyno tells me, Dizaster has performed for free. The videos have on average ten to fifteen times more views than any of the Arena's other videos, around 400,000. Dizaster stands to make inroads with a local crowd, a crowd for whom his English material may have been inaccessible, by playing to racist stereotypes that solidify his own Lebanese belonging despite his diasporic past. His anglophone fans get to see him as an "authentic" Arab, having heard his opponents' bars that fall back on staid stereotypes of prayer rugs and terrorism. He can also lay claim to having founded battle rap in the Middle East, credit which organizer Chyno graciously grants him. Edd wants to support Chyno's project to build battle rap leagues in the Middle East. Because we have missed each other in Beirut the last few times I was there, I have not spoken with Edd about the rap battle, but I know he has a penchant for competition and enjoys displaying his artistry. He also stands to gain from the publicity of appearing in a rap battle video with Dizaster. Ultimately, however, he gets caught up as a foil to Dizaster's anti-Black bars, without an opportunity to respond in the one-round battle.

Subjugating Blackness into the Nation: Rap Videos from Benghazi

About halfway into his 2018 music video "منطقتنا" ("Our Area"), Libyan rapper Double Y drops the following lines as he gestures to two men in the background, one lighter-skinned and one darker-skinned: "we've got the *whites* and the *n****as* / look, we've got no racism".⁷ The rapper's point, somewhat unexpected thus far in the song, is to include the supposed lack of racism as one among many positive qualities of his neighborhood, the al-Hada'iq district of Benghazi. These lines and accompanying gesture, as they map US-American racial categories in English onto Libyan subjects, fail to hold up Double Y's claim but instead provide a clue as to how Libyan artists conceive of and instrumentalize race and racism within the structures and aesthetics of hip-hop. Here, I want to try to illustrate this by examining in more depth two recent music videos by major Libyan rappers from Benghazi. Although this short piece cannot attend to the complexities of race in Libyan society, the contours relevant here can be briefly related as follows. The imposed colonial borders of the modern nation-state of Libya include Black and non-Black indigenous peoples, all of whom were discursively constructed as "non-Libyan" through forty years of totalitarian Arab nationalist rule and propaganda (despite a phase of shallow pan-Africanism). Additionally, other groups of Black people are present in Libya, either due to recent migration and human trafficking towards Europe or as a result of the early modern trans-Saharan slave trade. General media as well as popular discourse in the country tend to conflate categories such as African, Black, and non-Libyan with the result that Blackness and Libyanness are often juxtaposed.

In 2017, Ahmed Alshafee returned to the hip hop scene after a year-long absence with a new music video. His previous songs, in which he rapped about the disastrous effects of unemployment, or general disenchantment after the 2011 Libyan revolution, could be characterized as a type of Libyan conscious rap. "Kish," though, was a marked shift in his aesthetic and content.⁸ Like many of his videos, it is set in al-Kīsh, a poorer neighborhood

adjacent to downtown Benghazi. But here, instead of the run-down buildings and abandoned warehouses of al-Kish forming the backdrop to a discussion of social issues, they are intended to provide a “gangsta” aesthetic for the video. As Alshafee, shirtless in a video for the first time, raps lines in partial English such as “*n***a, I’m a gangsta, gangsta, gangsta / thug life, watch out don’t forget it*” surrounded by his (also shirtless) posse bearing various weapons, deadly turf battles are depicted via intercut scenes.⁹ Full of posturing, tough-looking, weapon-brandishing young men, the song—as its (English) chorus “*Kish, my hood, my city*” declares—mainly consists of Alshafee bragging about the toughness and masculinity which characterizes both himself and his neighborhood.



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Image-2-Adam-Benkato.png> >

Figure 2. Rapper Ahmed Alshafee (center with baseball bat) and his posse in the video for “Kish” (2017).

Yet it is not so much Alshafee’s lyrics which create a feeling of a tough or violent part of town, but rather the visuals, in particular the racial composition, and actions, of his posse, comprised mostly Black Libyans who brandish weapons in the background or participate in turf battles. As the song ends and the beat fades out, individual members of his posse are highlighted as they attempt to perform a type of tough masculinity by flashing weapons and polishing knives.¹⁰ Of these, all except one are Black. The visual message is rather clear: Alshafee is drawing upon an association—partially derived from Western hip hop—of Blackness with gangs and urban violence in order to achieve his desired “gangsta” aesthetic. Indeed, “Kish” is probably to be counted among the first Libyan “gangsta” rap videos: Nevertheless, other Libyan rappers who I have interviewed find “Kish” rather unconvincing—Alshafee’s sudden turn to an exaggerated performance of masculinity linked with employment of racial stereotypes comes across as disingenuous to those familiar with his background and previous rap interests. Interestingly, the aesthetic of “Kish” seems to be something Alshafee could only accomplish by instrumentalizing his posse of mostly Black Libyan men.

Around the same time, MC Swat, one of the most important figures in Libyan rap since the 2011 revolution, released a music video entirely different in tone and substance. In “استغلال” (“Exploitation”), his last production in Libya before fleeing across the Mediterranean due to death threats,¹¹ MC Swat angrily takes on the corruption, assassinations, kidnappings and other social ills which have plagued Libya in the past few

years.¹² Laying out a litany of the average Libyan's suffering, MC Swat sums it all up in the chorus:

Exploitation! Killing, killing, and exhaustion!

استغلال قتل قتل والاستهلاك

Libyans' sustenance flows away and their blood becomes halal

رزق الليبي سايل ودمه تما حلال

Rape and murder, kidnapping and killing

الاغتصاب والاعتقال الخطف والاعتقال

Just another day in the life of a Libyan

روتين الليبي اليومي في جدول الاعمال

Exploitation!

استغلال



< <https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Image-3-Adam-Benkato.png> >

Figure 3. MC Swat is assassinated by a hit man hired by other Libyans in the video for "Istighlāl" (2017).

The visuals interspersed with MC Swat rapping tell a story that runs parallel to the song's lyrics. The opening skit depicts a non-Black man walking into an auto shop, where he asks a mechanic working beneath a car about some unfinished business. The mechanic responds in perfect Libyan Arabic before sliding out from under the car, at which point the first man notices that the mechanic is Black and mockingly asks him "Oh, so you're Libyan?" before giving him an ID and some cash and leaving.¹³ As the story progresses via intercut scenes, we learn that the mechanic has been commissioned to carry out a hit on MC Swat himself. And sure enough, after he delivers the last verse, MC Swat is shown being shot point-blank by the mechanic and left to die in the street.

While the song itself provides a valid and well-received criticism of highly relevant problems, and the lyrics do not discuss race, the visual narrative culminating in the assassination of MC Swat provides a layer of commentary on Blackness in Libya. The introductory scene seems at first to be almost sympathetic in its depiction of a common

experience of Black Libyans—that of not being taken as Libyan even while speaking perfect Libyan Arabic. Read generously, this part, taken in the context of the song as a whole (which is a criticism of Libyans killing and otherwise hurting each other), could perhaps be a sort of roundabout way in which MC Swat is actually affirming the Black mechanic's Libyanness. While MC Swat blames those who kill, kidnap, and exploit for Libya's ills, he nowhere states that such people are *not* Libyan. Yet, this video does not provide any positive depictions of Blackness in a Libyan context. In fact, the mechanic's role as a hit man is parallel to a broader negative stereotype in Libya: that of Black African men as pro-regime mercenaries (مرتزقة).¹⁴ Furthermore, this particular character assassinates not only a major rapper, but one who is associated closely with the ideals of the revolution. In addition, in the second interlude, the mechanic and his interlocutor both use an Arabic anti-Black slur (عبيد) in such a way that suggests only depictions of social reality rather than critique. The arc of the visual narrative then simply feeds into the stereotype of Black men in Libya as non-Libyan, as well as their direct association with violence through their availability as hitmen. Correspondingly, the targeting of MC Swat by a Black hitman in the video is perhaps a way of further bolstering MC Swat's own authenticity as a rapper insofar as it reflects actual threats against him which caused his flight from Libya to Europe, positions him as a potential victim of such hitmen, and even channels gun violence against major US-American rappers.

Returning to Double Y's song with which we began, we can note that though his intention is to depict racial harmony in his neighborhood, his lines in fact do just the opposite by enforcing racial categories which separate non-Black Libyans from Black Libyans, whom he refers to as "whites" and "n***as," respectively. Though these are not racial categories commonly used in Libyan discourse, and the n-word is problematically adopted here as part of the overall aesthetic of globalized hip-hop, these lines still gesture to issues of race in Libya. A separation of non-Black and Black Libyans is possible for Double Y because Blackness is held to be incompatible with Libyanness. As shown by both Ahmed Alshafee's "Kish" and MC Swat's "Exploitation," Blackness can be instrumentalized visually to provide the violent masculinity desired by two rappers as both "gangsta" aesthetic and the social context within which they perform their music.

Closing

In both the Lebanese rap battle and the Libyan music videos, Blackness is mobilized discursively and aesthetically to reinforce the boundaries of belonging to a national identity. In these mobilizations there are, of course, striking tensions. Hip hop is a set of Afro-diasporic forms of cultural expression with historical ties to Black liberation in the US. In many instances around the world, including in the Middle East and North Africa, hip hop has provided a generic ground for expressions of revolution and struggle in crucial historical moments. At the same time, as we have described, these musical genres can also be repurposed antithetically to bolster pre-existing colorism or anti-Blackness. Masculinity plays a role in these moves. In the Lebanese context, Dizaster's refusal of Edd's Lebaneseness via racist battle rap "bars" impugning his Blackness and ejecting him from the nation is just such a repurposing, one done through a hypermasculine physical and vocal gestures. In the Libyan context, Blackness is in fact incorporated into the nation, but with a hard boundary separating it from being included within what is "Libyan" and, often, as in the videos of Ahmed Alshafee and MC Swat, as a prop to express a violent masculinity. By considering these two contexts and examples together, we not only point

to those racial formations as they exist prior to the Libyan or Lebanese use of globalized media, in particular the adoption of hip hop as a musical and performance genre. Rather, we have sought to illustrate how localized understandings of color or race can prove so powerful that they can overtake the globalized forms of expressive culture, severing them from their original meanings and fusing them instead to local grammars of race or racism. Our message, then, is that scholars must attend to these twists and turns, as genres like hip hop course from context to context so that we can better reckon with the—seemingly contradictory—messages they carry along the way.

Notes

1. This section appears below. Edd Abbas and Dizaster, "Edd + Dizaster, excerpt 1," posted by Chris Nickell, YouTube video, 0:24, <https://youtu.be/QWjPD4hOst4> < <https://youtu.be/QWjPD4hOst4> > .



2. Edd Abbas and Dizaster, "Edd + Dizaster, excerpt 2," posted by Chris Nickell, YouTube video, 0:36, <https://youtu.be/rZWtINgnGyA> < <https://youtu.be/rZWtINgnGyA> > .

Edd + Dizaster, excerpt 2



3. Edd Abbas and Dizaster, "Edd + Dizaster, excerpt 3," posted by Chris Nickell, YouTube video, 0:58, <https://youtu.be/zUly7yd5cU> < <https://youtu.be/zUly7yd5cU>> .

Edd + Dizaster, excerpt 3



4. These gestural elements can be seen in the following excerpt. Edd Abbas and Dizaster, "Edd + Dizaster, excerpt 4," posted by Chris Nickell, YouTube video, 0:25, https://youtu.be/7DXGMzw_au8 < https://youtu.be/7DXGMzw_au8> .

Edd + Dizaster 4



5. The Druze are an ethno-religious group mostly concentrated in the Levant, distinct from both Shi'i and Sunni Islam, and one of the state-recognized sects of Lebanon's post-Civil War power-sharing government.
6. See Marc D. Perry, "Global Black Self-fashionings: Hip Hop as Diasporic Space," *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 15, no. 6 (2008): 635–664.
7. This part of the music video appears at https://youtu.be/_L-86jedSac?t=116 <
https://youtu.be/_L-86jedSac?t=116> .:

Double Y Mantegna 2018 دبل واي منطقتنا



Code-switches to English are denoted by italics here. عنصرية is the term we have translated as "racism" in this context, though it bears mentioning that it has a broader meaning of "prejudice" or "chauvinism" and is often used in those ways across the Arabic-speaking world, for instance to describe the nationalist sentiment of some Lebanese nationals against Palestinian refugees and Syrian migrant workers, or for example in Libya to describe a range of sentiments such as eastern/western regionalism or anti-Amazigh discrimination. Double Y, "Double Y Mantegna 2018

دبل واي منطقتنا" posted by Shehab Sky شهاب, YouTube video, 4:14, https://youtu.be/_L-86jedSac.



8. Ahmed Alshafee, "Kish," posted by Holm Institution, July 18, 2017, YouTube video, 3:49, <https://youtu.be/RDr6UHz1eu4> < <https://youtu.be/RDr6UHz1eu4>> .



9. "Kish", at 1:11, <https://youtu.be/RDr6UHz1eu4?t=71> < <https://youtu.be/RDr6UHz1eu4?t=71>> . This is one of a few switches into English including the main line of its chorus. 
10. "Kish", at 2:35, <https://youtu.be/RDr6UHz1eu4?t=165> < <https://youtu.be/RDr6UHz1eu4?t=165>> . 
11. See Mary Fitzgerald, "'It Shows How Desperate the Situation Has Become': The Rapper who Fled Libya," October 2, 2017, *Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/oct/02/desperate-situation-rapper-who-fled-libya-mc-swat> < <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/oct/02/desperate-situation-rapper-who-fled-libya-mc-swat>> and Dario Sabaghi, "From Outspoken Rapper to Refugee, the Turbulent Life of MC Swat," February 19, 2018, *Middle East Eye*, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/outspoken-rapper-refugee-turbulent-life-mc-swat> < <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/outspoken-rapper-refugee-turbulent-life-mc-swat>> . 
12. "MC SWAT – *Istighlal*" posted by i film, April 17, 2017, YouTube video, 6:15, <https://youtu.be/apKxg1moN-U> < <https://youtu.be/apKxg1moN-U>> . Note that the included subtitles are often incorrect, especially as regards American slang (even going so far as to incorrectly equate various Libyan Arabic terms with the English n-word).

MC SWAT - استغلال



13. "MC SWAT – *Istighlal*" posted by i film, April 17, 2017, 6:15, at 0:24 to 1:50. [↗](#)

14. It is widely held that in 2011 Qaddafi did in fact bring in mercenaries from other African countries to help control the protests and subsequent all-out fighting. The subsequent association of Black Africans in general with non-Libyan mercenaries resulted in violence towards a number of Black men in Libya, Libyan and non-Libyan alike. [↗](#)

Author Information

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Chris Nickell received their PhD in music at New York University in fall 2019. Chris' dissertation drew on ethnographic fieldwork with participants in independent music scenes of Beirut, Lebanon to better understand how they mobilize performances of diverse musical masculinities to shore up their social status and defer threats of downward mobility. Chris is also a community organizer in Northern Manhattan and currently serves as Deputy Chief of Staff for State Senator Robert Jackson.

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Article details

Chris Nickell, Adam Benkato, "On Blackness and the Nation in Arabic Hip Hop: Case Studies from Lebanon and Libya," *Lateral* 10.1 (2021).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L10.1.14>

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ISSN 2469-4053